

***Things Fall Apart* BACKGROUND INFORMATION – BIOGRAPHY**

Born in 1930, **Chinua Achebe** occupies a significant place among non-native writers of English; he “is perhaps the most influential writer to have come out of Africa since the late 1950s.” He is one of the most important of the African writers and has done much to promote writing in English by editing the African Writers series, published by Heinemann, that gives voice to many diverse voices in Africa.



Achebe was born in the Igbo (formerly spelled Ibo) town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria. His father was a missionary instructor in catechism where Achebe started his education at the Church Missionary Society’s school. For two years the language of instruction was Igbo and it was not until later when he was eight, Achebe started learning English. Because of this late introduction of English in his life, he was able to develop a pride in his culture and also appreciate his native language. While his father’s library was full of books in English, his mother instilled in him a love for traditional storytelling. Nigeria was still a British colony during much of Achebe’s youth and because his family spoke English, they held much power in the town.

Achebe was educated at Government College, Umuahia and then at University College, Ibadan, where he studied liberal arts. His first stories were published during this period and later become the collection published in 1972 called *Girls at War and Other Stories*; afterwards he was able to visit Britain and the United States. Growing nationalism in Nigeria in the forties and fifties also had a tremendous influence on Achebe who changed his English name Albert to the Igbo name Chinua, which is an abbreviated expression for “May a *chi* fight for me.” After graduating college in 1953, he began his career in radio with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, and soon became Director of External Broadcasting. It was in London while he was attending the BBC Staff School that he submitted his novel *Things Fall Apart* to a publisher. It was published by Heinemann in 1958 and fame came practically overnight. Returning to Nigeria, he continued to work for NBC and developed programs that aimed to develop a national consciousness about Nigerian culture and affairs. Because of his creative work, he was invited first by the University of Nigeria, Lagos, and for short periods by the American Universities of Massachusetts and Connecticut to teach.

It is evident that Achebe is a writer who has conscious literary aims and political motives. Well versed in the poetics of Western literature, he utilizes many Western literary genres. In this novel, he relies upon the genre of the English novel, but at the same time manages to weave native elements of African culture such as story telling and proverbs into the narrative. He also employs structural elements of classical Greek tragedy in which a flaw in the protagonist ultimately leads to his downfall. Ultimately, all his books share the theme of two cultures in conflict with each other: that of the West and Africa. The exploitation and colonization of Africa by the West is never overshadowed by the formal aspects of his work. It is the pivotal theme that gives his writing such a deep and lasting impression on the reader.

Chinua Achebe's novels and critical pronouncements have profoundly influenced his readers' understanding of Africans and their lives and have formed the basis for many discussions of 'the African novel.' Many great English novelists like Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and E.M. Forster have influenced him, but Achebe transcends these influences and writes with an authentic African consciousness, interpreting his own traditions and culture in a language that is essentially native, the Igbo-derived English. In fact, one of Achebe's greatest achievements is the creation of a prose style that, while incorporating African usage and thought patterns, is fluid, lucid and is in impeccably good English. It is a product of a sophisticated mind thoroughly educated in English language and literature as well as his own native culture.

To his credit, Achebe has written four other major novels since *Things Fall Apart*. In 1960, he wrote the sequel, *No Longer at Ease*. In 1964, he wrote *Arrow of God* and in 1966, *A Man of the People*. All were written within a comparatively brief span of eight years. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* is considered to be a literary classic and read all over the English-speaking world. It has been translated into many languages and won him a major literary prize the year after it was published. Apart from these, he has produced a few essays of critical and sociological interest, like 'English and the African Writer', 'The Novelist as a Teacher' and 'The Role of the African Writer in a New Nation.' Achebe's work reflects his preoccupation with the sociological and humanistic aspects of his nation, both in past and the present times.

It is justified to call Chinua Achebe 'the father of the African novel in English.' His influence both as a creative writer, political activist, and a critic has been immense. In particular, his use of 'African English,' drawing on proverbs, tales and idioms of traditional Igbo culture has provided a legitimate literary voice of post-colonial Africa to emerge.

Politics and writing share a symbiotic relationship and Achebe believes that the writer should be "at the head of the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa." Many writers from former European-dominated colonies share his view that the writer's role in these new emergent nations should be linked to the social and political welfare of the country. As he claims, "I am a protest writer" and that "any good story, any good novel, should have a message...."

Since the sixties, Achebe has been doing more teaching and lecturing and less fiction writing, although he has published books for the young and has concentrated exclusively on educating them. He also wrote *Anthills of the Savannah*, which was a finalist for the Booker Prize in England in 1987. Much of his later writing since the seventies has been wrapped up in the political turmoil of Nigeria which has undergone a series of upheavals and coup d'états by various political factions. In the sixties, Achebe was targeted for persecution by one of the non-Igbo lead governments as a dissident and so he fled with his family to Eastern Nigeria, which had declared itself an independent state called Biafra. After a bloody civil war, Biafra was defeated and Achebe exiled himself to Europe and then America.

Achebe has received many honors, and his fame has spread not only in Africa, but all over the Commonwealth, Europe and America. He has been made a Fellow of the Modern Languages Association of U.S.A. and has been awarded Honorary Doctorates by the Universities of Sterling and Southampton. He has also won the coveted Neil Gunn Fellowship awarded by the Scottish Arts Council.

At present, Chinua Achebe lives with his wife in Annandale, New York where they both teach at Bard College. They have four children.

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